

*. . . Bill Also Includes Farm Disaster Aid
That Would Help Vermont Farmers With Flood Losses*

Washington, D.C. - After intense negotiations, House and Senate conferees on a supplemental spending bill have accepted legislation backed by the Vermont Congressional Delegation that would pave the way for a full extension and expansion of the safety net that helps dairy farmers ride out downturns in milk prices. House and Senate Appropriations Committee negotiators late Monday approved the bill that includes the MILC provisions.

The bill also includes more than \$3 billion in farm disaster relief funds long awaited by farmers in Vermont and in other states but which were blocked last year by the Republican-led Congress, and it also sets aside \$20 million to help dairy farmers in Vermont and across the country.

The House and Senate are expected to vote on the supplemental appropriations bill this week. President Bush has said he will veto the bill because it includes a timetable for withdrawal of troops from Iraq. After the veto, Congress will reformulate the bill and send it back to his desk.

Sen. Patrick Leahy (D), a senior member of the Senate Appropriations Committee and a leading conferee on the bill, said, "As usual on dairy issues, we're on a high-wire walk across many obstacles, and any misstep can be perilous. But for the MILC program, it's so far, so good."

The provision included in the final version of the bill was the Senate's language, authored by Leahy, which provides a 10-year baseline that ensures mandatory funding for the MILC (Milk Income Loss Contract) program and would lay the groundwork for reauthorizing and expanding the program in this year's Farm Bill. The counterpart House bill also included a MILC provision that would extend the program for 13 months, though without Leahy's ten-year funding baseline. The Vermont's congressional delegation - Leahy, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I) and Rep. Peter Welch (D) - have worked closely together to advance the Senate's MILC provisions. Their effort is part and parcel of their joint effort to build a coalition of support for extending and improving the MILC program in this year's Farm Bill.

Leahy said, "Farmers are hurting, and many are making plans now not just for this season but also for their future. They need to know the MILC program will continue to be there when they need it."

Sanders said, "Family dairy farmers in Vermont and across this country are up against the wall with high feed and energy costs. The Vermont delegation is working every angle to see that family farmers get the help they need to continue farming. Getting this one-month extension of the MILC program is a critical first step in our efforts to create an effective safety net for dairy farmers."

Welch said, "Many of Vermont's dairy farmers are struggling to survive and all they have ever asked for is a fighting chance to succeed. This agreement sets the stage for our delegation to fight for reauthorization of the MILC program in the upcoming Farm Bill."

Leahy, Sanders and Welch also said this bill may be the last chance to enact the farm disaster aid, which would help Vermont farmers recover from flood losses last year. "Last year's floods compounded the setbacks that farmers are enduring, and it is unconscionable that last year's Congress and the White House have stood in the way to prevent this overdue relief," said Leahy.